

Adult Bible Study Part 1 of 4



Bible Verse: 1 Corinthians 12:18 (NRSV)

“But as it is, God arranged the members of the body, each one of them, as he chose.”

Opening Discussion

How many people here know someone with a disability?

How does your friend or family member cope in his/her community?

Are there things that your friend or family member may need help with when it comes to completing certain tasks?

Do you have a disability? Would you be willing to share with the group?

How do others treat your friend, family member or you?

Introduction

We have just discovered a wide range of both abilities and disabilities. Through this opening discussion, we see that the term “disability” is not very precise, especially if we are defining an intellectual or developmental disability. If we continued our analysis, we would learn that this label is applied, not only to people whose disabilities are obvious, but also to individuals who have operated in what we would call the “social norm” for most of their adult lives.

“I prefer to be called Joseph, not the man in the wheelchair.”

—Joseph

We have also discovered that saying a person has “a disability” is largely useless as a descriptive term and usually tells us little about **who the person really is**. While these various labels and terms are helpful in the fields of medicine and social services, they have little use in most everyday life situations.

“I know I need extra help in math, but I wish they wouldn’t call the class special!”

—Matthew

Because these labels follow the individual throughout her life, they serve to accentuate her differences and push us into “dealing” with her by providing “special” services and attention. These efforts are well intentioned but often counterproductive. They run the risk of increasing her isolation and adding to feelings of inadequacy.

1. How can labels help? How can they hurt?

When someone does not fit the social norm, our efforts are to force normalcy on them. Words such as “mainstreaming” and “integration” often disguise society’s attempt to change the very

“If I go to heaven and there is no Down syndrome, who will I be?”

—Gineen

essence of who a person is to fit its view of normal. There is little consideration of how the person with disabilities sees herself. We do not understand that having a disability is “normal” for her; we do not allow her to embrace her disability as being a part of who she is. We only ask her to change.

2. Think about your friend with disabilities. Do they want to change? Should they change?

3. *Would they still be who they are if they changed? Why or why not?*

“Maybe the issue in heaven is not that I will hear, but that you will understand my language.”

—Alex

WITH them vs. TO them, and what does the Bible really have to say about disabilities?

Asking questions of this nature is an essential step in engaging the Body of Christ in our mission to all people, not only those with disabilities. We are all “created in Jesus Christ to do good works;” we are all **Meant to Be**.

Disability and the Bible

There are many mentions of persons with disabilities in the Bible. In order to gain a biblical perspective, we will have to look at several passages in their cultural and historical context. In addition, let’s consider the spiritual implications of each example. We are certainly aware of the limitations of medical knowledge in ancient times. We may be further hampered by the fact that the Hebrew culture of the Bible was not as advanced in the healing arts as were other ancients. The Egyptians, Babylonians, and the Greeks each were considerably more “scientific” in their approach to the treatment of injuries and disease.

“My teacher always says that this (points to the left) is my good leg and this (points to the right) is my bad leg. I wonder why she says that. As far as I know, legs can’t do anything wrong.”

—Patrick

Our purpose in this study is not to criticize the social services industry; it is to determine the Church’s responsibility in supporting people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Is proclaiming the Word and administering the Sacraments enough? What adjustments need to be made, what efforts initiated? How do our attitudes have to change so that we may effectively minister

Both the Old Testament and Hebrew culture reflect a holistic, or entire person, approach to health and healing that seems foreign to our modern thinking. The physical and the spiritual were intertwined, and the emphasis was on prevention more than treatment. Disease and disability were considered the result of sin. They were therefore directly connected to the sin of the affected individual and healing was associated with God.

Read the following passages together. **Exodus 15:26**, **2 Samuel 12:13–19**, **Psalms 38:1–8**.

4. *What do these passages tell you about the attitudes toward health and healing among the Hebrew people?*

Essentially, in the Hebrew worldview, all difficulties faced in life were caused by the presence of sin in the world. Healing is strongly connected with the coming of the Messiah, as is the presence of general well-being.

Read **Psalms 103:1–5**, **Malachi 4:2**, **Isaiah 1:1–9**.

5. *What do these passages tell us about what was anticipated with the coming of the Messiah?*

Miraculous healings were fairly uncommon in the Old Testament. Read these accounts **1 Kings 17:17–24** and **2 Kings 5:1–14**.

6. *What New Testament events are brought to mind?*

How do these actions, such as cleansing and the raising of the dead, foreshadow what would happen when Jesus came?

“People always ask me how I got this way. I just tell them that I was born this way. It is who I am.”

—Justin

So far we have dealt with disability and disease in the broadest of senses. Today we recognize that there is a difference between the two terms. Not all diseases result in a disability and not all disabilities are caused by diseases. We know that what we call “disabilities” can be the result of differences in the individual’s genetic code as well as external causes. We also know that a person with a physical or intellectual disability may be

completely healthy in all other ways. We have considered what the biblical attitude toward disease and disability, now let us look at its attitude toward the individual.

Read **Leviticus 21:16–24**.

7. *What does this seem to say about God’s attitude toward any disability?*

In order to enter the Old Testament priesthood you had to be a male from the tribe of Levi, the smallest tribe of the people of Israel, numbering only 23,000 males older than 1 month old out of a total male population of over 600,000.

8. *How does this additional information affect the interpretation of the Leviticus 21 passage?*

See Numbers 26:57–62

An important part of the study of Scripture is keeping passages in the correct context.

9. *What other factors influence how we understand this passage?*

The work of the priest was often strenuous and grueling, a fact that can easily be missed with our modern experience

and impression of the pastoral office. The Hebrew priest was responsible for performing the ritual sacrifices and burnt offerings using animals ranging from turtledoves (easy) to bulls (not so easy). The priest would kill the animal, drain its blood and sprinkle it on the altar for a burnt offering. The priest would then quarter the animal, offering each of the parts on the altar until they were entirely consumed by the fire. They tended the fire, making certain that it did not go out, or that the ash did not build up. As the sacrificial system changed, the custom was to offer a sacrificial lamb each day, morning and evening to foretell Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. No wonder priests were forced to retire at the age of 50!

10. How does knowing about the duties of a priest change your interpretation of the Leviticus 21 passage?

The limitations imposed on the priesthood are obviously not intended to portray anything regarding God's attitude towards

persons with disabilities. The Old Testament sacrificial system pointed toward the perfect sacrifice that would be offered by the wholly innocent Son of God, Jesus Christ. All involved, from the animal "without blemish" to the priest had to reflect, or demonstrate, at least on the surface, the perfection of Jesus who would offer his blood as the atonement for all the sins of humanity.

Next session, we will continue with our study of what the Bible says about disabilities. We will concentrate especially on the work that Jesus did during his earthly ministry and touch base with the Apostle Paul and the early Christian Church.

Adult Bible Study Part 2 of 4



Bible Verse: 1 Corinthians 12:18 (NRSV)

“But as it is, God arranged the members of the body, each one of them, as he chose.”

Last session we discovered that the Bible does have a lot to say about disability and disease. We learned that the Old Testament attributed all human difficulty and suffering to the presence of sin in the world. We also discovered that, in general, the Hebrew worldview included a close connection between spiritual and physical well being, and the belief that healing was based on God’s blessing. It was also closely connected to the coming Messianic age, or what we call the Kingdom of God. We then dug into a passage in Leviticus 21 that, at the outset, appeared to degrade disability. Yet when considered within its proper context, its implications were limited and practical in nature.

“I was never allowed to see my sister. They said that I would hurt her. I had to live at the hospital.”

—Andrea

Events of healing were a rarity in the Old Testament, a sharp contrast to the passages that we will consider in today’s study. In the Old Testament the emphasis on prevention, usually through the isolation of the individual with disabilities or disease, a tendency that will be reversed in the actions of Jesus.

Let’s look at some of the examples of Jesus’ healing and see if we can discover a common thread or theme and possibly gain a better understanding of the Biblical view of disability.

Read **Matthew 8:14–15, Mark 1:29–31, and Luke 4:38–39.**

1. *What and who do these passages have in common?*

How do the gospel writers present this story differently?

Luke was a physician and yet he tells us that Jesus “rebuked the fever.” *What does this seem to suggest?*

Read **Luke 5:17–26**, one of the renditions of the healing of a man’s paralysis.

2. *The man’s friends believed that Jesus could heal his paralysis, but what does Jesus do before he heals him?*

Jesus’ forgiveness of the man causes a stir among the religious leaders. *What is the basis of their objection?*

Jesus then uses the man as an object lesson for the religious leaders. *How does he accomplish this?*

Jesus’ question to the Pharisees in verse 23 is obviously meant to get them thinking. *How would you answer his question?*

One of the most compelling examples of a culturally created disability is seen in how persons with leprosy were treated. Because certain strains of the disease were both contagious and incurable, all unusual skin conditions were viewed with suspicion. Leviticus 13, an entire chapter of the Bible, is devoted to instructions about leprosy; it even addresses “leprosy” diseases in clothing (mold and mildew). The Old Testament inclination toward prevention led to the isolation of anyone who had symptoms that remotely resembled leprosy. This Levitical attitude was obviously carried over into the New Testament period. Jesus’ contacts with these social outcasts are among the most moving healing episodes in the gospels.

Read **Luke 5:12–16**. Then read **Leviticus 13:45–46**.

3. *In what ways were the Levitical guidelines violated... by the individual? and by Jesus?*

Parallel Passages:
Mark 1:40–44,
Matthew 8: 1–4

What part of the Levitical code did Jesus uphold?

What other populations have been labeled “outcasts” by society? What were the reasons for this label?

Leviticus 14
will help with
this answer

Before we continue our study, we need to acknowledge that the Bible never specifically mentions either intellectual or developmental disabilities.

In fact, it does not even allude to them. There are a few cases where mental illness is portrayed, most notably when King Nebuchadnezzar “ate grass like oxen” in the fourth chapter of the book of Daniel. David “pretended to be mad” out of fear of

You will notice that most of the Biblical translations still refer to people with leprosy as “lepers” or individuals who are paralyzed as “paralytics,” etc. These remain labels and only serve to identify people by their traits or by their disabilities, in effect dehumanizing them. “People First” language assures that we see the person before we acknowledge their disability, whatever it may be.

King Achish (1 Samuel 21:13), and Saul exhibited symptoms of depression in 1 Samuel 16. **While mental illness can certainly be a disability, it is not the same as either intellectual or developmental disabilities.** We must make a similar distinction in the following passages.

Read **Mark 5:1–13**.

4. *What is different about this healing?*

How were the demons made manifest in the life of this man?

Would you consider this a disability?

“There are still times when I have something bad happen in my life, that I wonder what it was that I did wrong. Does that ever happen to you?”

—James

Some scholars say that the New Testament uses demonic activity to explain actions and events due to a lack of scientific knowledge. Many even say that this is the Bible’s way of portraying mental illness or even intellectual and developmental disability.

In Mark 5:1–13, and other times when Jesus cast out demons, what evidence do we have that Scripture is referring to intellectual or developmental disability?

Earlier, we noted that the Old Testament often viewed disease and disability as direct retribution, or punishment, for a specific sin. This attitude was exhibited by some of Jesus’ disciples.

Read **John 9:1–7**.

5. *What does the disciples’ question tell us about their attitude toward disability? What does Jesus’ response say about this specific occasion?*

Are we to assume that all disability is given by God to display his works? Why or why not?

“I want to be fully included. I don’t want to be excluded. I don’t like when people stare at me and look at me like there is something wrong with me. I want to promote a positive outlook. When I come to this church I get a warm feeling and people don’t stare and look at me funny.”

—Paris

Today’s lesson has centered on the healing ministry of Jesus Christ. We have seen some dramatic events and familiarized ourselves with some of the prevailing attitudes of his time. Jesus fulfilled the ancient prophecies regarding healing. There was not a disease, infirmity, or a disability that he could not cure or remove. However, he did more than just cure. **He exhibited the love of God through acceptance and inclusion.** Just as there was no physical condition that he could not overcome, there was no group of outcasts he would not embrace. He touched men covered in leprosy prior to their healing, he confronted demons, he accepted the Gentile. Jesus paid little attention to the social behaviors and attitudes of his day. He was about restoration.

Next session, a look at the early church and the Apostolic age.

Adult Bible Study Part 3 of 4



Bible Verse: 1 Corinthians 12:18 (NRSV)

“But as it is God arranged the members of the body, each one of them, as he chose.”

In the past two sessions, we have looked at how the Old Testament treated disability and disease and contrasted this with the healing outreach that was a large part of Jesus’ earthly ministry. We identified the Old Testament’s emphasis on prevention rather than healing, and observed that this often led to the isolation of the affected individual. We also noticed that Jesus never refused to heal those who approached him, never made demands of them or imposed conditions, and that forgiveness of sin was often a part of the cure. **Jesus’ healing events were a picture of God’s perfect grace, his power acting as he wills without human participation.**

*Visit John 1: 14–18
and Acts 20:24*

“Even when I get really sick, my friend Angelo visits me. Sometimes he comes to the hospital. He even shakes my hand.”

—Juan

If you count them up, there are over 40 healing accounts in the four gospels, and we can be sure that many more went unrecorded. Still, we can be certain is that disease and disability did not vanish during Jesus’ years on earth. This opinion is supported by the fact that the Apostles continued a healing ministry after Jesus’ ascension, and because we still experience these things first hand.

Read **Luke 13:10–17**.

(Visit **Mark 7:31–37**, **Luke 7: 1–17**, **Luke 8: 40–56**.)

1. *What was the woman’s disability in this passage? How long had she had her disability? To whom did Jesus attribute her disability? If Satan was present and powerful while Jesus was walking the earth, what does that tell us about our situation? The woman in this scene did not ask to be healed. Why did Jesus heal her? What lesson was Jesus trying to teach the leader of the synagogue?*

In the past sessions we have learned that the Hebrew worldview included a belief that disease and disability were retribution, or punishment, for individual sin. Revisit **John 9:1–6**.

2. *Does Jesus’ response to the disciples’ question support this belief?*

“I have always been unable to see. I don’t know life any differently. Sometimes people say that I am ‘missing so much.’ How can I miss something that I have never known before? Maybe there is something in my life that they are missing. Should I be constantly reminding them of that?”

— Kenneth

Return to **Luke 13** and read verses 1–5.

Although this passage does not speak directly to disease or disability, it does speak to human suffering.

3. *How does Jesus’ statement here relate to the passages that we have just considered?*

Focus on verses 3 and 5.

4. *What is Jesus’ central message in his response to the question asked?*

Read **Luke 4:18–21**. (In Luke 4, Jesus is reading from Isaiah. See **Isaiah 61: 1–2**.)

5. *How did Jesus’ healing miracles fulfill this prophecy from Isaiah?*

“Not a day goes by when someone doesn’t comment about my face or stare or point at me. People laugh at me all the time. It’s like they think I can’t hear them. Maybe they just don’t care if I hear them. Maybe they think it doesn’t matter if I hear them.”

—Emily

Reconsider the woman in the synagogue that we read about in Luke 13.

6. *What spiritual language did Jesus use that is connected to this Old Testament reading?*

It is apparent that we should no longer consider disease and disability as retribution against the individual sinner, but rather, as a constant reminder that we live in a sinful world and are subject to its power and influence. Jesus came to free us from this bondage, but full freedom will not be realized until his permanent kingdom is established on his return. While Jesus was on earth we were given a glimpse of the Messianic kingdom, what we call the Kingdom of God, that is to come. His healing

miracles were only a foretaste of his perfect creation, his heavenly kingdom which he has already established. Until that time, life continues with its suffering and struggles.

It is best not to use the words suffer, ailment, illness or defect when referring to a person who has intellectual or developmental disabilities. Unlike diseases, his disability is a part of who he is; it is not caused by an outside agent, nor is it curable.

7. *Discuss the differences between viewing sin as retribution and the actual consequences of sin.*

Did you know that one of the greatest theologians of all time had a disability? Next session we will look at what the Apostle Paul has to say about church unity and the partnership between the weak and the strong. If you would like to read ahead, look at 1 Corinthians 12.

Adult Bible Study Part 4 of 4



Bible Verse: 1 Corinthians 12:18 (NRSV)

“But as it is, God arranged the members of the body, each one of them, as he chose.”

This is our final session on the Bible and disability. We began by establishing that the Old Testament often presented disease and disability as being retribution, or punishment, for an individual’s sin, that the Levitical laws were geared toward the prevention of disease, and that the Hebrew worldview looked to God and his Messiah to bring healing to them. We also studied a passage that, at first glance, seemed to be very degrading to persons with disabilities, but discovered that it was specific to a small percentage of the Hebrew people, that it spoke to the priest’s ability to perform his function, and that the appearance of perfection foreshadowed the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Revisit Leviticus 21.

“I would never put words in Christ’s mouth, but it seems to me that he was saying, ‘I love you. I have compassion for you. I can help you with your burdens; but the ultimate thing I can do for you is forgive you. That is what I am all about. It is my perfect gift to you.’”

—Sandra

As we moved to the New Testament, everything changed. Jesus’ emphasis was on healing, not prevention. He demonstrated power over every type of disease and disability, even those that were manifestations of demonic possession. He *never refused* a request for healing, and in many cases healed individuals who had not asked for relief, showing his compassion. He would often use a healing event as a teaching moment, especially when dealing with the religious leaders. Jesus also dispelled the notion that disease and disability were directly related to sinful acts, attributing them instead to the presence and power of sin and the devil in this world. He lifted burdens with his acts of healing, just as his death on the cross would lift the world’s burden of sin.

was often accompanied by healing events, and in some cases a healing presented the opportunity to share their story. Just as importantly, the accounts of Jesus’ power to heal became a part of their proclamation, as the story of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection became the standard formula.

Read **Acts 10:34–43**. This occurs immediately after God revealed his plan for the Gentiles to Peter.

1. *What truths does Peter affirm about healing?*

How are Jesus’ miracles used by Peter?

What is the “ultimate” miracle?

Even the Apostle Paul was given the power to heal (*see Acts 28:7–9*), a fact that is ripe with irony, as we shall soon see.

Read **2 Corinthians 12:6–10**.

2. *How is Paul’s “thorn” consistent with other disabilities that we have studied? What is the result of Paul’s thorn?*

Discuss how Paul was made strong in his weakness.

How are we made strong in our weaknesses?

It is impossible to know exactly what Paul’s thorn was. However, we can be fairly certain that it was a physical disability and that it was at times debilitating. There are some additional hints in his letter to the Galatians.

Read **Galatians 4:12–14**.

Here Paul refers to a “bodily ailment” that caused him to remain among these congregations.

3. *How did Paul describe this ailment?*

See Acts 3.

Miracles of healing continued after Jesus’ ascension. As the apostle’s began to preach the Gospel, their presence

Have you ever faced a bodily ailment that held you back from something?

What were Paul's expectations because of this ailment?

What were your expectations because of your ailment?

Read **2 Corinthians 10:10**.

4. What further light might this shed on Paul's disability?

***Ironic and significant:**
Paul had a physical burden that went uncured and yet he is given the power through Christ to lift others' burdens.*

Paul was one of the greatest men of God that ever lived, and God chose to allow him to live with a disability that could interfere with the work that he had been called to do. The passage in Galatians tells us that he was acutely aware of the effect that his appearance could have.

However, Paul was certain that his thorn was not sent by God, but that it

Discuss the difference between empathy and pity.

was a "messenger of Satan." Rather than see it as an impairment, he was able to embrace it in his instruction to others.

Read **1 Corinthians 12:12–26**.

5. How might Paul's personal experience with disability have shaped what is written here?

Paul had spent considerable time in Corinth (see Acts 18), how would knowing of Paul's disability affect you as a Corinthian hearer of his letter?

How does society define: President Roosevelt, Stevie Wonder, Helen Keller, Phil Keaggy, President Ronald Reagan, Marlee Matlin, Joni Eareckson-Tada?

Did your group discuss each person's accomplishments first or did you ask, "What's wrong with that person?" Why?

Reopen your discussion on 2 Corinthians 12: 6–10.

6. Does this passage add anything to your understanding of Paul's view of weakness?

Paul tells us that the Body of Christ, the Church, is a collection of "differently-abled" individuals. No one is more important than another; no one is without a place. There are no "handicapped" within the Body, only those whose function is critical to the health and well-being of the Christian Church.

It is recommended that this Bible class follow up this study by visiting and discussing the *Meant to Be Terminology Worksheet*.

***OPTIONAL:** Look up the history of the word "handicapped." How do you feel about using this term now?*